

The "Lost" Paradise Parrot

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With apologies to Milton, and without irreverence, it may be suggested that it would not be out of place to term the story that here follows, "Paradise Lost and Regained." In brief, it centres on a beautiful Queensland bird which was known in Europe of old as the Paradise Parrot—a species which suffered so severely towards the close of the last century that it has long been regarded by many ornithologists as extinct—dreadful word!—but which has been proved by Queenslanders to be, if very rare, still extant.

It was nearly eighty years ago that John Gilbert, able coadjutor of the great John Gould, when carrying out ornithological work on the then recently-discovered Darling Downs, shot Parrots of a species he had not previously seen. Gould referred the specimens to the genus *Psephotus*, and, filled with admiration of the beauty of the birds, gave them the specific title of *pulcherrimus*. "The graceful form of this Parakeet," wrote Gould, "combined with the extreme brilliancy of its plumage, renders it one of the most lovely of the *Psittacidae* yet discovered; and in whatever light we regard it, whether as a beautiful ornament to our cabinets or a desirable addition to our aviaries, it is still an object of no ordinary interest." Superlatives having been wrung from a seasoned ornithologist who saw only lifeless specimens of the "most lovely" bird, what was to be expected from those persons fortunate enough to know it in life? But, strangely enough, little was written about the species until the eighties. By that time, apparently, large numbers of Gould's Beautiful Parrot had been sent abroad for aviaries, and had become known to the bird-dealers of Britain and the Continent under the name of Paradise Parrot.

What a degree of popularity and admiration the shapely little Australian enjoyed (*sic!*) is made evident by W. T. Greene, M.A., M.D., F.Z.S., in his finely-illustrated *Parrots in Captivity*, published in London in 1884. After describing the "Beautiful or Paradise Parrot" as more lovely, if possible, than the Many-coloured Parrot (*P. multicolor*), the writer says: "No one can see it without desiring to possess so beautiful and graceful a bird, and large sums are constantly being paid for handsome specimens by amateurs; but alas! one in a dozen survives a few months and—dies suddenly in a fit one day." Further, the Rev. F. G. Dutton, a correspondent of Greene's, improves on the foregoing tribute by saying soundly, "*Psephotus pulcherrimus*, the Paradise Paroquet, as the dealers call it, is not only the most beautiful *Psephotus*, as its name says, but surely the most beautiful Paroquet that exists. The vivid emerald green and brilliant carmine of the cock, beautifully contrasted with the grey



Beautiful or Paradise Parrots (*Psepholus pulcherrimus*) on Termites' mound ("Ant-hill"). Male at entrance to nest. Female above.

Photo. by C. H. H. Jerrard, Queensland.

of the rest of the plumage, make him 'a joy for ever'." Could admiration be more whole-hearted than this? "But," adds the reverend writer, "handsome is as handsome does, and I regret that I cannot give any of those I have kept a good character as a cage bird. They are very shy, and the cock is much given to driving about the hen."

It would appear that in those days nothing was known in England of the unusual nesting habits of the Paradise Parrot. Greene, never guessing that the object of his greatest admiration was addicted to nesting in termites' mounds, laid it down that *Pezoporus formosus* (now *P. wallicus*) was the only Australian Parrot that did not breed in trees. After observing that odd specimens of *pulcherrimus* had been known to exist for at least two years in outdoor aviaries in England, Greene adds that "in Germany eggs have been produced, but as yet no young of this species have been reared in captivity, at least to our knowledge." On this point, Dutton remarks that a pair he had was "most anxious" to bore into the wall of a room in which they were placed; but instead of encouraging this laudable desire, he sent both to the Zoological Gardens, where they died. Greene and Dutton are in accord regarding the good health of the species in captivity, the former stating also that he knew of "few foreign birds more amiable and inoffensive in their habits, or more susceptible to being completely tamed." He was on less solid ground in adding that "these slim and elegantly-shaped birds are natives of New South Wales, where they feed on the honey and pollen of flowers, flies, and small insects, and in winter on such insects and seeds as they can find."

Many years before the date of Greene's book Queensland settlers had become more or less familiar with the breeding habits of *Psephotus pulcherrimus*. To them it was, variously, the Ground Parrot, Ground Rosella, Beautiful Parrot, Elegant Parrot, and Ant-hill Parrot, to which multitude of titles was added subsequently the name of Scarlet-shouldered Parrot. In many districts it was a favourite cage-bird, though, perhaps, no more so than outside its own country. The Barnard family, of Coomooboolaroo, near Rockhampton, were among the earliest people with ornithological leanings to take note of the nesting-habits of the "Ant-hill" Parrot.* When Carl Lumholtz, the Norwegian author of *Among Cannibals* (London, 1890), was at Duaringa in 1881, he was introduced by the Barnard boys to the burrows of the beautiful bird in termites' mounds, and of these he penned an interesting description. On another occasion, near the Nogoia River, Lumholtz had an experience with a pair

* Some writers have overlooked the fact that Silvester Diggles, in his unfinished *Ornithology of Australia* (issued about 1868) stated of this bird: "The eggs (five in number) are deposited on the bare ground in a deserted anthill, the entrance being a small hole in the side. The young are covered with a thick white down, and much resemble those of hawks."

of these birds that deserves to be revived from the semi-obscurity of his book.

"An hour before sunset," he says, "I left camp with my gun, and soon caught sight of a pair of these Parrots, † male and female, that were walking near an ant-hill, eating grass-seed. After I had shot the male, the female flew up into a neighbouring tree. I did not go at once to pick up the dead bird—the fine scarlet feathers of the lower part of its belly, which shone in the rays of the setting sun, could easily be seen in the distance. Soon after, the female came flying down to her dead mate. With her beak she repeatedly lifted the dead head up from the ground, walked to and fro over the body, as though to bring it to life again; then she flew away, but immediately returned with some fine straws of grass in her beak, and laid them before the dead bird, evidently for the purpose of getting him to eat the seed. As this, too, was in vain, she began again to raise her mate's head and to trample on the body, and finally flew away to a tree just as darkness was coming on. I approached the tree, and a shot put an end to the faithful animal's sorrow."

A LOSS AND A SEARCH.

That little tragedy will serve, fittingly enough, as an introduction to a dark period in the history of the species generally. Possibly the sad phase had its genesis much earlier, with the spread and stabilising of settlement. Howbeit, the fact is that as the years went by the Paradise Parrots steadily decreased in numbers. In time they became an unknown quantity on the markets overseas. In time, too, they vanished from districts where once they were a feature—a very beautiful feature—of the sub-tropical landscape. The decimation attracted no particular attention in ornithological circles until 1915. Then Mr. A. J. Campbell, C.M.B.O.U., wrote in *The Emu* (vol. 14, p. 167), an article entitled "Missing Birds," specifying in this respect the Paradise or Scarlet-shouldered Parrot (*P. pulcherrimus*), the Turquoise or Chestnut-shouldered Parrot (*Euphema pulchella*) and the Night-Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*). "It would be interesting to know," wrote Mr. Campbell, "if these three beautiful Australian Parrots still exist or have been exterminated. If the birds are extinct, what is the cause or causes of their extinction?" After adding that "all that remain to-day appear to be a few stuffed specimens in collections," Mr. Campbell suggested that perhaps Mr. Charles Barnard, of Central Queensland (now President of the R.A.O.U.) could state when the Beautiful Parrots were last observed in his district. To this query Mr. Barnard replied that his people had not seen one of the Parrots since the 1902 drought, at the same time undertaking to look for the species at Fairfield station, an old haunt.

† Lumholtz called the species *Platycercus pulcherrimus*.

Mr. Barnard subsequently informed me (June 15th, 1919) that he visited Fairfield in the preceding September. The search was unavailing. "Where, about the year 1882, the birds were plentiful and breeding, there was not one to be found on this occasion, nor any trace of old nests in the ant-hills."

That was all. There was no other response to Mr. Campbell's inquiry. The Paradise Parrot, it appeared, had been lost in annihilation's waste. So it seemed to ornithologists in Australia, and so it seemed to Mr. Gregory Mathews in England. "It is a matter for deep regret," he wrote in 1917,§ "that this most beautiful of Parrots appears to have become extinct without any lasting record of its life-history being made." Further, in referring to another Parrot, not yet uncommon, Mr. Mathews advised study "before it becomes extinct like its congener, *P. pulcherrimus*."

That was the position when, in the middle of 1918, the subject was taken up afresh in Queensland, the stronghold of the missing bird. Hints gathered in conversation with old settlers had indicated that further search would be at least worth while. Accordingly, letters on the point, bearing the query-caption, "Is it lost?" were directed to and published by the leading daily newspapers of Brisbane and the Darling Downs. The response was prompt. It was also partially satisfactory. Most of the replies received earliest dealt with the species only from a posthumous viewpoint, but at last there came a note calculated to dispel some of the growing fear that "the beautiful has vanished and returns not." A constable of police who had served for fifteen months at a native police camp at Coen, Cape York, identified the missing bird from a description published in the *Brisbane Courier*, and affirmed that it was still to be found in the far North. This was heartening. It was doubly interesting for the reason that the range of the species was greatly extended, the most northerly record previously given being a somewhat indefinite one, by Dr. Ramsay in his *Tabular List*,|| for Port Denison, a little to the south of Townsville. Further inquiries tended to confirm the constable's statement, the present patrol at Cape York stating, in an official report, that the bird was not at the Cape itself, but was moderately plentiful at a certain point in the neighbourhood of the Archer River.

In addition, the constable in question made it clear that his "ant-hill" bird was not the Golden-shouldered Parrot (which also nests in termites' mounds) by sending the following note in substantiation of his letter of a year previous: "Re the Scarlet-shouldered Parrot. It makes its nest in ant-hills, from about six inches from the ground to a height of about four feet up the ant-hill, but I always found most nests at a height of approximately two feet. The average number of eggs laid is four, although on one occasion I found five eggs in a nest. I have

§ *Birds of Australia*, vol. 6, p. 422.

|| *Proc. Linnean Society, N.S.W.*, vol. 2, 1878.

noticed these Parrots moving over the ground in numbers, but I never noticed more than two or three close together at any time. I have also seen the Golden-shouldered Parrot, and it is similar in habits to the Scarlet-shoulder, but not so plentiful. Both of these birds keep moving back when settlers take up land close to their habitat. They never seem to trouble trees, but if disturbed fly off and alight on the ground further away."

The next piece of information as to the whereabouts of the residuum of the Paradise Parrots was almost equally surprising, coming as it did from as far west as Longreach. The writer was a drover (W. A. Campbell), and he reported having seen several of the birds on the Nive River, 25 miles above Augathella, in May of 1918. "One pair was bathing in a large waterhole within a few yards of me while my horse was drinking. I took particular notice of them because they were so quiet." It is not reflecting on the author of this note to say that I was unable to get it substantiated by station-men in the Augathella district; but it is at least possible that his birds were Turquoise Parrots, which beautiful birds are (or were) more partial than *P. pulcherrimus* to the expanses of the interior.

Well, for three years the benevolent pursuit of the lost Parrot was continued intermittently. And intermittently there floated in suggestions and whispers regarding the existence and whereabouts of odd members of the species. Occasionally, something more definite arrived. For instance, a bushman dwelling in an out-of-the-way spot between Bundaberg and Gladstone reported in 1919 that the missing "Red-shoulder" was to be seen about his locality. He knew nought of its distinctive breeding habits, but mentioned that some of the birds could be seen in captivity. Accordingly, Mr. C. T. White (Queensland Government Botanist) and myself took train on a night in April of 1920, travelled 250 miles in that way, walked ten miles through inhospitable country, and crossed a broad creek in a leaky boat, what time hordes of ravening sand-flies scored our bare legs—all to find that the local Parrot was *Ptilinopus*, the Red-wing, a bird that could be seen in a dozen cages in Brisbane! The irritating similarity of vernacular names had deceived our friend. Still, as old John Burroughs once said, "Whichever way I go, I am glad I came." Among other arresting sights of the locality were a pair of White-eared Flycatchers (*Monarcha leucotis*) and two young, this being probably the most southerly record of the breeding range of MacGillivray's beautiful Flycatcher.* But that by the way.

THE "LOST" BIRD FOUND BREEDING.

We come now, somewhat belatedly, to more recent and thoroughly definite developments in the search for the Paradise

* *Monarcha leucotis* was first taken by John MacGillivray, naturalist of H.M.S. Rattlesnake, on Dunk Island, in 1848. It is still but little known. Eds.



Habitat of the Beautiful Parrot (*Psephotus pulcherrimus*) showing type of country, entrance to nest in a "Termite" mound and photographer's hiding place.

Parrot. On December 11th last, Mr. C. H. H. Jerrard, a keen naturalist and capable photographer, wrote from the Burnett country to say that he had seen a pair of Parrots which he was almost sure were *Psephotus pulcherrimus*. A description which he supplied, and which fitted the species, was made out as the birds perched in a tree, but for portion of the time when watched they were on the ground. Less than a week later Mr. Jerrard became sure of his birds, having his opinion reinforced by a neighbour who had kept the "Ground Parrots" in captivity years before. Moreover, on December 15th he was fortunate enough to see what he took to be the same pair of birds with a group of young ones. There were seven or eight Parrots in all, and in the cases of five or six of them the centre only of the abdomen was red and the breast was greyish, instead of green and blue. At least one was seen to be fed by a parent bird. All were feeding on grass seeds, which they obtained by running the stalks through the bill.

Here, at last, was a report that was not only definite, but was one that came from within reasonable distance of Brisbane,† and, moreover, was made by a man who was competent to follow it up. His attention having been directed to the termites' mounds, Mr. Jerrard soon found holes suggesting the breeding-hollows of the Parrots. In more than one case there were signs that nesting operations had been commenced and then left off. But the year drew to its end without any discovery of an actual nest, and the scant literature on the subject having given September-December as the breeding period, there remained but little hope of a pair of the beautiful birds being studied "at home" for many months. Queensland birds, however, swayed by a wilful climate, are not as other birds are in the matter of breeding seasons. So, it was not altogether surprising that the patient watcher was able to report, on January 21st, 1922, that a pair of the Parrots had recommenced work on a hollow that had previously been visited. On that date Mr. Jerrard watched the mound for two hours, but was chary of investigating closely. He saw the male bird pay one visit of inspection, without actually entering the hollow, the female being in the vicinity at the same time. That caution of the observer was wise. Subsequent observations made it clear that eggs were not laid in January, for it was not until March 4th last that Mr. Jerrard was able to report with certainty that the female Parrot was brooding eggs.

From this point on the watcher waxed keener than ever in his fraternal spying upon the rare and lovely Parrots. Working with care, he erected a rough hessian shelter in front of the exposed little hillock that afforded the birds a home (see Plate),

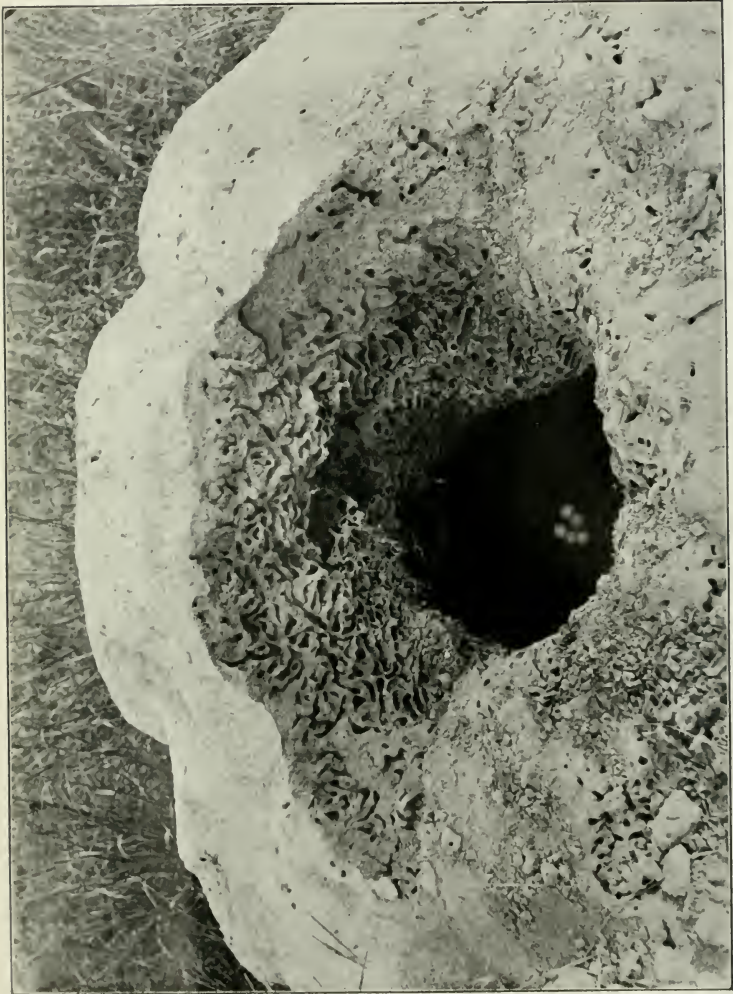
† It will be sufficient to say that the spot is about 150 miles north of the capital city, and not far from the point where Professor Richard Semon, of Jena, saw specimens of the species in 1891.

and from this vantage-point was able both to study and photograph the pair. On March 18th last Mr. Jerrard sent me the first picture ever taken of the Paradise Parrot at its nest. This photograph (Plate 5.) depicted both male and female, and showed the regal little head of the house to be the bolder bird of the two. Indeed, though apparently the female was sole custodian of the eggs—the male was never seen to enter the tunnel—she was much more nervous than her mate. Frequently he would accompany her to the hollow, which she would at once enter and remain in for periods extending from half an hour to two hours. The ceremony attached to her re-emergence was both interesting and pretty. The male would alight on the mound, and, looking into the hole, emit soft, sweet chirps until the faithful little home-keeper answered by coming out and flying off with him.

Is not this practice in affinity with the methods adopted in the conduct of the homes of Hornbills? The male Paradise Parrot is evidently master of his own household, and were he not, as the old English aviculturists assure us was found to be the case, an entirely amiable bird, he might have developed—who knows?—the domineering tactics of the Hornbills, and walled his mate in the nesting-hollow for the term of her breeding period. But this is rather an idle supposition to apply to a *menage* which, despite what the reverend bird-keeper of old had to say about the male driving his mate about a cage, is obviously ruled by affection. Certainly, the regal bird would seem to take to himself "more time for vainer hours" than his sober little consort, but who will say that all this grace and beauty should be hidden away in a dark hollow at any time? Further, Scarlet-shoulder is apparently the melodist of the pair. "He has a musical and very animated song," writes Mr. Jerrard. "I heard it in October of 1921, and noted how his whole body vibrated with the force and intensity of his musical effort, imparting an agitated motion to the long tail, which bore adequate testimony to the vim of the performance. It all seemed to indicate a very intense little personality under the beautiful exterior."

Considering all the circumstances attached to the species, what would any reader of these notes have aimed at in the case under review, apart from placing on printed and pictorial record something of the life-history of the species? We thought the matter over, and came to the conclusion that it would be best to take some of the young from that nest in the public interest. It might be possible to have them breed under authoritative control; but at least thousands of people who would wish to see live specimens of a distinguished Queensland bird should be given the opportunity to do so—under proper conditions. Alas! that amiable scheme was doomed to failure. On April 8th Mr. Jerrard reported that some mischance had intervened to prevent the eggs being hatched. He had reason to believe that incubation had commenced before the beginning of March, but, judging





Eggs of the Beautiful Parrot (*Psephotus pulcherrimus*) in situ in Termites' mound.

Photo. by C. H. H. Jerrard, Queensland.

by the behaviour of the birds, there was no indication of young near the end of that month. Any further history attaching to that nest can be told briefly.

"In accordance with the suggestion contained in your last letter," wrote Mr. Jerrard early in May, "I opened up the nest on April 24th, there being no longer any doubt that it had been deserted. The enclosed photographs show the result of that investigation. I was careful not to touch the eggs before photographing them. They had not been disturbed, but seem to be all addled. One was punctured and the contents dried up; another I broke, and found it to contain nothing but stinking fluid. No embryo seems to have developed in any of them. I cannot suggest any reason for this state of things. Had the parents been very shy of my hiding-place at first I might suppose that the eggs had got cold. But the fact is that I fixed up the hiding-place about noon on March 7th, left it for nearly two hours, returned, and after less than an hour's wait the pair came to the mound and the female entered the nest. It was a hot, sunny day, and the mound was like a warm oven, so the eggs could hardly have cooled. I left the hutch there that night, but the birds seemed to be quite familiar and unafraid of it."

Then follow these notes, taken on opening the mound: "The entrance tunnel is about nine inches long and one and a half inches in diameter. It enters the nesting-chamber at the top and to one side, so that the eggs cannot be seen or touched from outside. The nesting-cavity is roughly circular, about 15 to 18 inches in diameter and eight inches high in the middle. The light, honey-comb material in which it is excavated had not been carried outside (as in the case of the harder material through which the tunnel is bored), but lies at the bottom, forming the bed of the nest, on which the eggs lie. There is no other material whatever. The floor of the nest is lower than the ground outside. The eggs, five in number, are white, with a pinkish tinge, and measure .9 in. x .8 in. Both ends are shaped nearly alike. They rest under the centre of the mound. There were no termites in the mound when I opened it."

No further nests of the kingly Parrot have come under notice, but from general observations Mr. Jerrard is able to offer a few additional notes of interest. In 1921 he saw one pair and heard of another, the former couple bringing out a brood of four or five. This year there was the pair which he studied at the nest, and several persons reported seeing half a dozen of the birds together—two old birds with a family. That is all. Three other mounds have been examined, but the nests were old; one had two entrances, a few inches apart, communicating with one large cavity within. It is regarded as remarkable that during a month of last year in which a pair was under observation they were never observed outside of a particular area of about two or three acres; one suggestion is that this was a feeding-ground, and that the nest was some distance off. Attention was usually

called to the birds by the short and sharp but musical whistle uttered before taking flight from the ground on the approach of danger. They allowed one to approach on horseback within, perhaps, twenty yards before rising. Mr. Jerrard thinks that the old birds are constant to one nesting locality year after year, and that some of their offspring subsequently pair and nest in proximity to the parental home. He has never seen one of the Parrots more than a mile from the spot where he first discovered them last year.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT.

It will, perhaps, be permissible now to examine the past distribution and habitat of the Paradise Parrot, both from printed records and private information. Gould recorded the species for both Queensland and New South Wales, but qualified this distribution by stating in his *Handbook* (1865): "Little more is at present known respecting this bird than that it is an inhabitant of the upland grassy plains of Queensland." A. J. North quotes this latter statement in his *Nests and Eggs of Birds found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*, adding that though very willing to claim the beautiful bird for his State, he could not find justification for doing so. "I have never met with it nor heard of it being observed in any part of the State," he says, and goes on to regret being unable to describe the adult female bird from the small series of skins in the Australian Museum. The late Silvester Diggles, of Queensland, wrote of the species as being "found most plentifully in the district of Darling Downs," adding that it had been obtained in other parts of South-Western Queensland, "specimens having been shot occasionally near both Ipswich and Brisbane." Further, I have personal information that the bird was plentiful in the Brisbane Valley, particularly about Crow's Nest and Esk (at which latter place it was a favourite cage-bird), and that it was not uncommon to meet with pairs or small groups of the birds near Brisbane many years ago.

From the Darling Downs, Ipswich, and Brisbane districts the distribution of the species appears to have extended in a northerly rather than a westerly direction. There is a printed record of specimens being taken in Western Queensland, but I have reliable information that the species was known of old in the south-western districts of Goondiwindi and St. George. The former township being on the border of New South Wales, it is fair to assume that the Beautiful Parrot did reach the southern State, but probably no one can say if the dip was ever sufficiently pronounced to justify the bird being recorded as other than a Queenslander. Reaching north from the Brisbane district, the main resort of the species was the Burnett and Wide Bay areas. Several correspondents have made patent this fact, and all agree that the species preferred slightly scrubby grass-country rather than open plains. Northerly again, the "Ant-hill Parrot" was

found a little to the west of Rockhampton; then there is Dr. Ramsay's record from Port Denison, after which the species appears to make an amazing jump of about one thousand miles, to the vicinity of far Capè York.

A REMARKABLE HABIT.

In the course of the search for the missing Parrot, it became evident that the name Ground Parrot was the most familiar one for the bird, "Elegant" that by which it was known to dealers, and "Ant-hill" Parrot the most definite title for identification purposes. It was, indeed, the bird's habit of nesting in termites' mounds, no less than its graceful and pretty ways, that made it so noticeable in earlier days, the only other Parrot known to follow this practice being the closely-allied *P. chrysopterygius*, the Golden-shouldered Parrot of the far North. Incidentally, it is curious to reflect that the notable nesting trait of these two Parrots is shared by certain other species of birds possessed of long tails—a factor which would seem rather opposed to occupancy of an earthen burrow. The beautiful *Tanysiptera sylvia*, the Long-tailed Kingfisher of the far North, also breeds in termites' mounds. Further, *Merops ornatus*, the so-called Bee-eater, which is graced with two long, feathery shafts extending beyond the tail, always makes its nest by burrowing in a bank or in sandy ground with, preferably, a slight slope. Why this point of similarity between birds whose only other feature in common is the possession of long tails?

It would appear, however, from what my correspondents have been able to ascertain, that *P. pulcherrimus* is not constant to termites' mounds for nesting purposes, but, like most other members of the genus *Psephotus*, may resort to trees. Certainly, it is not so confirmed a ground-loving Parrot as the unobtrusive *Pezoporus*. A bushman living near Crow's Nest tells me that he once saw an "Ant-hill" Parrot dash into a tree to escape from a Hawk; and Mr. A. J. Roderick, of Howard, says he frequently saw the birds feasting on acorns of the oak-trees. Gould, by the way, stated that the species fed on "the seeds of grasses and other plants growing on the plains," and Diggles records its food as grass-seeds and those of small papilionaceous plants.

Correspondents unite in agreeing that the species was never particularly communistic. Usually the birds were to be seen in pairs or, at most, half a dozen together, and then only locally. In this respect the rare species differs a good deal from the commonest member of the genus, *P. haematonotus*, the Red-backed Parrot of south-west Queensland and the southern States, which I have often seen associated in flocks running into three figures.

In regard to the behaviour of the species in captivity, the following interesting instance is given by Mr. J. O'Neill Brenan, an experienced Brisbane naturalist: "Prior to the year 1880 a few

were regularly caught by a bird-catcher and dealer then living in Brisbane; and in January of that year his catch included three or four young 'Beautifuls.' They were not nestlings, but had not been long upon the wing, that fact being apparent from the colour of their beaks, which were light yellow or cream coloured. I bought one, a young cock; he learned to whistle the usual 'Pretty Joey,' and at times made attempts to imitate the song of a Canary. He had, however, been trapped a little too late to make a good artificial whistler, and invariably broke into his native bright little call. Although quite friendly, always greeting me merrily when I approached his cage, he would never submit to the slightest handling, and would often attack the hand of a person attending to his food and water tins. He was a very hardy bird, did well on canary seed, was fond of bird's eye chili and milk thistles, and enjoyed perfect health from the day I bought him until nearly thirteen years afterwards, when a wind storm blew his cage down. The fall injured him internally, and he died the next day.

"If you asked any of the old-time bird dealers about the 'Beautiful' Parrot they would not know it," continues Mr. Brennan. "They called it the 'Elegant,' which, of course, is quite a different bird.* The man from whom I bought my bird told me that the first lot of 'Beautifuls' (he called them 'Elegants') that he and his brother sent home brought £25 a pair in London. It is to be hoped that this aptly-named little Parrot has not actually died out. Its length of tail gave it a most graceful appearance, whilst the adult male's variety of colouring was so perfectly blended that it was exquisite as well as brilliant. Flying in the sunlight the Bullen-bullen (*Barnardius barnardi*) takes some beating, but I think the 'Beautiful' was ahead of it."

WHAT CAUSED THE DECIMATION?

We come now to an examination of the cause or causes behind this tragedy. As to the active agency responsible for the disappearance of the Paradise Parrot, opinions vary. It is reasonable, in the first place, to assume that the bird's habit of nesting in the mounds of termites has contributed to its destruction by rendering the brooding bird, eggs, and young peculiarly open to attacks by natural enemies. Mr. William Gleeson, of Crow's Nest, includes among these Hawks of various kinds and "sand iguanas." The latter factor is condemned also in the following note from Mr. J. Nash, a kangaroo-shooter of ten years' experience from Nanango north to Mackay and all through the central west. Mr. Nash, as a keen bird-lover, says with sorrow that he has only seen the "Ground Parrot" twice during the last decade. "I only saw very few of them along

* *Euphema elegans.*

the Cherwal River, about four or five miles north of Howard, and a few on the Isis River. This was about the year 1910, so there is only a very remote chance of them being left. Now," he proceeds, "these lovely birds have been (or are being) exterminated by iguanas. It is no trouble at all for the 'goanna' to dip into their nests and take either the eggs or young. The same thing applies to the nests of many birds which build on branches. I know what I am saying to be correct, as I have repeatedly shot 'goannas' in the act of robbing nests, and other shooters have told me the same thing. . . . I say most emphatically that the iguana does more harm to our birds in one nesting season than is counter-balanced by all the good it does during the remainder of its life."

While admitting the general soundness of these observations, it has to be remembered that natural enemies of the "Ant-hill" Parrot were just as numerous in the days when the bird held its own. A similar consideration must apply also in regard to a note that the aboriginals were wont to pull the young Parrots out of their ant-hill homes and roast them for food. What appears to me to be more feasible as a cause of the decimation is contained in a letter from Mr. H. Griffith, of Jimboomba, near Beaudesert, who offers the interesting suggestion that considerations of food, affected through human agency, may have been the primary cause of the sad thinning-out of this Ground Parrot. "In this district," he says, "the settlers burn the grass annually, and that at a time when the seed is ripe. The grass must grow thinner, I fancy, leaving only the tough old roots established. Do you think this wholesale burning-off, which has been going on for years, has caused starvation among the Ant-hill Parrots or a wholesale movement to the west, where, perhaps, drought and fires have again helped to further the work of destruction?" Then there is the question of loss of food through natural causes. Mr. Barnard expresses the view that the big drought of 1902 wiped out the Fairfield birds, and Mr. Brennan says: "As the birds lived entirely on grass seed, the big drought would have levied a heavy toll." The force of these contentions is obvious, and is very little lessened by the prevalence of Cockatoos and Warbling Grass Parrots (Budgerigahs), which are birds of the west rather than the coastal grass, and essentially communistic.

But there is yet another element that has contributed to the tragedy of the "Ant-hill" Parrot. This factor is pointed to by Mr. Griffith in a further note, in which he says: "We have a pensioner living here, aged 97 years, who at one time trapped birds for a living. He knew the Ant-hill Parrot well, and says that he got ten shillings each for them; but that was years ago. He mentioned to me that he once set his traps to catch some of these birds at the nest, and on going up to it in the evening found that a large black snake had entered. Fancy trapping the parent birds, though, when the young were helpless!" Further evidence upon the point comes from Mr. R. Illidge, a Brisbane

veteran, who states: "I did not regard *Psephotus pulcherrimus* as a rare bird in the Brisbane district, though it was very local. Between Kelvin Grove and Bowen Bridge, on some open forest country, I frequently saw the birds, usually in pairs, but sometimes in little parties of perhaps half a dozen. I saw some trappers out there one year, and after that the birds seemed to have entirely disappeared from the locality." These are only solitary instances. Many more might be gathered readily enough. Moreover, it was not sufficient for the trappers to supply Australian aviaries and cages with Paradise Parrots; the beautiful birds, as we have seen, were shipped away indiscriminately to Britain, the Continent, and possibly other countries.

Having in mind, therefore, the effect of trapping, the burning of grass, and the ravages of domestic cats gone wild, it seems moderately clear that the "most beautiful Parrot that exists" has been brought to the very verge of extinction by human agency, following upon Nature's indiscretion in bestowing upon it the fatal gift of beauty without adequate means of defence or protection. It is all very lamentable. It is more; it is a national tragedy. Both the citizens and governing authorities of Queensland have neglected a definite duty—a duty to helpless beauty—in allowing these pretty birds to be sacrificed. Whether it is too late to make amends cannot well be said; but the authorities showed the right spirit, while these inquiries were progressing, in extending full protection to the "lost" species and all other members of the genus *Psephotus* and the kindred genus *Euphema*.

ARE OUR PARROTS FAILING?

Finally, let us look for a few moments at the position of Australian Parrots generally. Mathews expresses the view (*Birds of Australia*, 1917) that these birds "have shown signs of extinction in a very rapid manner." I agree with him. It seems to me that the Parrots of the mountains, the King and Crimson species, for instance, are holding out fairly well. So also are several of the broad-tailed Rosellas. Among the Grass-Parrots the little Budgerigah (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) and the Red-rumped Parrot (*Psephotus hematonotus*) are still fairly common. Aside from these two latter species, however, there is not one of the Grass or Ground Parrots that has not "slipped" very seriously. Where now is the Night Parrot? How rarely the Green Ground Parrot is reported! What has become of the regal *Euphema splendida*, the Scarlet-chested Grass-Parrot? (Once a plentiful species, only one company has been recorded in recent years, and that a small lot in South Australia.)

And what of that Paradise Parrot in miniature, *E. pulchella*, the Turquoise or Chestnut-shouldered Parrot? The late A. J. North, who had a wide circle of correspondents, wrote in 1911 that he had for years received inquiries from aviculturists con-

cerning this bird, but had not been able to afford them any information, the last specimen received at the Australian Museum (Sydney) being dated 1886. This of a species which John Gould had found quite common in N.S.W. in the forties,* and which Diggles, writing in the sixties, alluded to as "this beautiful but common species!" Two years later (in 1913), Mr. W. H. Workman, M.B.O.U., wrote to *The Emu*,† from Dublin, drawing attention to "the disappearance from the bird-markets during the last twenty years of the beautiful little Turquoise Parrakeet," and expressing the fear that the species had "gone the way of the Dodo and the Passenger Pigeon." "If our worst fears are realised," added Mr. Workman, "and this little bird has gone for ever, I think it would be of interest to ornithologists all the world over if a short history of the species were published in *The Emu*." The editors of *The Emu* appraised the question as an important one, and asked members of the R.A.O.U. for notes upon the species, either from past or present experience. There was no response. Two years later appeared A. J. Campbell's inquiry ("Missing Birds"), to which allusion has been made earlier. Again there was no response. All this caused Mathews to write in his big work (vol. 6, p. 549) that the Chestnut-shouldered Parrot was probably extinct, "and of its life history we do not know much." Readers of *The Emu* will remember that since then (last year, I think) a small company of the Turquoise Parrots was reported not far from Sydney. I have not heard, however, of any attempt being made to follow out Workman's suggestion in regard to fostering the breeding of the birds.

The extinction of a species is an appalling thing. How much more ghastly is the extermination of a genus! Such a possibility confronts us in regard to the *Euphema* Parrots. Mr. W. B. Alexander, M.A., C.F.A.O.U., tells me he thinks Parrots are failing the world over; but he would be the last to admit that because of that belief we should sit down with folded hands. The idea that such birds must have their day and cease to be can well be left to the trappers and dealers, gentlemen who mix fatalism with finance. The question is, then, what are the ornithologists of Australia going to do about this matter of vanishing Parrots? Surely it is a subject well worthy the attention of the annual congress of the Union! Meanwhile, let us, without reflecting on the claims of true science, dispute the dangerous idea that a thing of beauty is a joy for ever in a cage or a cabinet; and disdain, too, the lop-sided belief that the moving finger of Civilisation must move on over the bodies of "the loveliest and the best" of Nature's children.

* "All those who have travelled in the 'bush' of New South Wales," says Gould in his *Handbook* of 1865, "will recognize in this lovely species an old favourite, for it must often have come under their notice."

† Vol. XII., p. 207.